

Eleven days a week by OrangeLovePerson

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Language: English

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane & Dustin Henderson & Maxine Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-08-12

Updated: 2018-08-12

Packaged: 2022-04-23 02:26:53

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 4

Words: 10,280

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Stranger Things stories based on songs. :) Ratings from K to T, canon ships, lots of fluffiness and friendship, and the usual tiny overdose of Mileven. ^^

1. Chocolate (by The 1975)

Author's Note:

Hi, I decided to start a little story collection about some of my favourite songs. Feel free to send me prompts, too, if you like! Bye!

"Chocolate"

by The 1975

Max & Lucas & Dustin

Summer, 1985

"All that I'm saying is, can we be a hundred percent certain?"

"Dustin, for the last time: The moon landing wasn't faked!", Lucas groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, that's what we'd all love to believe, but the question is, can we know for sure?"

"Urgh."

"The nation with the biggest film industry on the planet, Lucas! *And* we would have had a good motive for the whole thing. The entire world was watching! No one wants a government that makes empty promises.", Dustin argued.

"Can you nerds shut up for just one second, please?", Max complained, barely looking up from the screen. "I'm working here."

"You've been 'working' for almost three hours now, Max.", Lucas quipped in, frowning. "Time for a break, isn't it?"

"Not until I get my damn high score back.", she growled, between her gritted teeth. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Now you know how I felt when you moved to town.", Dustin told her, wisely. "But that's just the way it goes. You work and work and work to get to a good score, and then, just like that, someone else comes along one day and you can't reclaim your freaking score ever again."

"Okay, you two really need to stop referring to playing this game as *working*.", Lucas decided. "And aren't you guys starving by now? Let's just go."

"I'm really sort of hungry, come to think of it.", Dustin realized. "Max?"

She rolled her head back, closing her eyes in annoyance and defeat. "Fine.", she grumbled. "Seems like today isn't my day for this, after all."

"What we really need to do", Lucas pondered, as they made their way out of the arcade, "Is find out who the score belongs to. That's what we did when you arrived. Otherwise, can we even be sure if the score is real?"

"What do you mean?", Dustin frowned.

Lucas shrugged. "Remember that one time when we thought Will's pacman score was gone, although someone had actually just managed to swop the names, somehow?"

"Who the hell does that?", Max exclaimed, looking disgusted. "What's that even good for?"

"Probably to brag in front of friends with it, I guess.", Dustin commented, thoughtfully. Max seemed pretty smug.

"Hm. Well, maybe my score is still there then, after all... If that's actually true, someone will get into a hell lot of trouble pretty soon."

"What, are you going to beat them, or something?", Dustin snickered.

"That would be an option, of course.", Max joked, while evilly rubbing her palms together like a comic-book-villain. The boys laughed.

"So, how are we doing this? How do we find out who that "B.I."-person is?"

They climbed on their bikes – Max on the back of Lucas', since that was a lot quicker than using her skateboard.

"That depends", Lucas considered, "How comfortable are you with stalking people, Max?"

"If it saves my Dig Dug score? Comfortable enough."

Lucas glanced at her, over his shoulder, and he smiled.

"Bob Ingram?"

"Nah. I'm pretty sure that's the name of one of our neighbours. The guy is like a million years old."

"Blaire Idell?"

"Hm. No idea who that is." Lucas made another small X on his paper and wrote the name down.

"Really, guys?", Max sighed, coming back from the bathroom and flopping down on Dustin's couch, "I thought you wanted to start some kind of observation, not just sit around writing lists."

"Yes, but there's only", Lucas counted, "There's only eight people in Hawkins who's last name even starts with I! Look!"

Max went over to him, glancing at the telephone book page.

"Yeah, and four of these are family names, smartass. See: Family Bill Irwin."

"Well, okay, but..-"

"But we can still use this sort of information.", Dustin shrugged. "If telephone books don't do the trick, we could go through our year book, see if someone in our grade has those initials."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe those aren't even *real* initials?", Max pointed out. "*B.I.* Could literally mean *bullshit initials*."

Dustin overheard her. "Oh, we could also ask Steve for his old yearbooks! That way, we can cover a whole lot of ground!" He scrunched up his nose. "Oh, wait, that doesn't work, Steve's at this job interview today, I think. But ... maybe Nancy or Jonathan can help us, instead."

Max sighed, rolling her eyes. "Alright, whatever. But I swear, if you two turn this mission into some lame, only-research thing, I'm gonna try to catch the score thief on my own, instead."

Dustin grinned, patting her on the shoulder. "Cheer up Max! We're so gonna solve this potential crime."

None of their classmates had the initials "B. I", however, so their own yearbooks weren't much of a big help. It also quickly turned out that Jonathan didn't own any old year-books, and if he did, he wasn't sure where they were right now.

It kind of made sense, come to think of it: Jonathan didn't really strike you as the sort of person who truly cares about this stuff. He was a bit of a social outcast, and not really involved or interested in any club or school sport, either.

So, around noon, Max, Dustin and Lucas dropped their bikes to the floor next to the Wheeler's house. Nancy would have a yearbook that she could borrow them, right?

Mike's mom let the three of them in, a phone pressed to her voluminously styled hair and a surprised, but polite smile on her face. Mrs. Wheeler pointed towards the basement, mouthing "Mike is downstairs", before disappearing into the kitchen again. The three of them looked at one another, making their way towards the basement steps.

Mike wasn't alone. Of course he wasn't. He and El sat at the table, a bunch of paper sheets and two or three large books spread out in front of them, looking like they were having the time of their lives.

"Twenty times seven... minus the root of nine... Is 137?", El suggested, looking uncertain.

Mike's grin was wide. "Yes, correct!"

At that, El smiled, too. "So the Eggo kingdom has 57 more Eggos than last spring.", she concluded, happily.

"And 21.3% more Eggos than two years ago.", Mike added, pointing at one of the exercises they'd apparently already finished.

Max cleared her throat, smirking. The two looked up, a little startled.

"Hey guys!", Dustin said, stepping down the rest of the stairs. "Do you know if Nancy's home, Mike? We were hoping she'd maybe lend us her old year-books."

Mike frowned, blushing a little from the sudden interruption.

"Um, yes, she's upstairs, I think... What do you even need that for?"

"It's an investigation.", Lucas answered, winking. "Don't worry about it. We'll tell you all about it in school on Monday, yeah?"

"Okay, sure...", Mike shrugged, still looking confused.

"Bye, El!", Max said, as an afterthought, while Lucas and Dustin were already making their way up the stairs again.

El waved back, a little puzzled, as well.

"No one? None of the people who is or has been going to or school these past few years has the initials *B.I.*?", Max complained, an hour and a half later, looking frustrated. She let the book in her lap drop closed, biting into one of the chocolate bars Dustin's mom had offered them ages ago instead.

"Well, I guess this means we just have to wait in front of the arcade, a couple times this week, and if we notice any new faces around Dig Dug, we might see what's going on...", Lucas murmured, pretty defeated.

"Forget it.", Max declared, grinding her teeth. "You know what? We went about this the completely wrong way. Who cares who *B.I.* Is, or whether the score is fake, or whatever." Max sat up straight, eating the rest of her chocolate bar.

"All I really need to do is save some money over the next couple days, and then go back to the arcade and manage a better score than ever, period. Better than my old scores, and better than that *"B. I."* guy, whoever that is."

"Or," Lucas considered, thoughtfully, "Or we could go back there *today*."

"Yes!", Dustin nodded, excitedly, "Let's try it again today, Max!"

He reached into his couch, between the cushions and the back rest, pulling three or four shiny coins out from its depth. Lucas was also reaching into his jeans, looking for money in all existing pockets.

"What? No, come on guys!..", Max groaned in annoyance, when she realised what her friends were doing. Max didn't like it when people borrowed her money, she didn't like it at all.

Lucas gave her a stare. "No, you come on, Max. We all want someone from our party to hold the Dig Dug score, and let's face it, you are our best shot for that. It's really just fair if Dustin and I help you get there."

Dustin nodded. "Yep. We just have to make sure that you're concentrated enough for this project, if we're really going back to the arcade." He threw another *"3 Musketeers"* bar into Max' lap. "Better store up some energy now already."

Max shook her head, grinning. "You sound like you're talking to El, Dustin."

He shrugged, his smile wide. "Well, you might not be able to be able to throw cars around or to make people's eyes melt, but your talent for this game is a sort of superpower, too, isn't it?"

"And you get to openly brag about it, whereas El has to hide her power.", Lucas added with a smirk.

Max rolled her eyes. "Oh, just shut up and give me some more candy, you freaks. I need to *"store up energy"* over here."

It was a long afternoon. It took so long, in fact, that it was almost as quiet in the arcade yet again as it had been the first time around, when the three had spend the morning here. Sure, there was always some noise in the background, but it was Sunday, and more and more kids abandoned their game consoles and screens eventually, to head home. When it was almost late enough to consider bribing Keith so he'd leave the hall open a little longer for them, something drastically changed, though.

And then...

"YES! Oh my god, yes!", Max screamed, while Dustin and Lucas broke out in excited laughter, "We did it! We did it, guys!"

"What, are you finally done?" Keith commented, only mildly interested, while shoving a bunch of potato chips in his bored face.

The three ignored him, jumping up and down and hugging each other in elation.

"Do you want to have the honour?", Max asked Dustin and Lucas, pointing at the screen. They looked at each other.

"Definitely.", Lucas said.

"The highest score in the history of ... ever.", Dustin murmured, awed. He reached for the keyboard, typing the first three letters. Lucas added three more.

"MAD MAX", the screen showed. 85 1300 points.

They drove back home in the dark, their grins brighter than the street lamps and their moods better than the most awesome chocolate bars. Although victory kind of tastes like chocolate, come to think of it. And friendship sort of does, too.

(the end)

2. Superficial love (by Ruth B.)

"Superficial love"

by Ruth B.

Nancy & Steve

Early October, 1984

It's been a while since she's last felt exactly like this, but something about the way Steve is talking today – the words he uses, the casual smiles he gives, the topics that come to his mind,- something about all of that makes Nancy want to break up with Steve.

Which is insane.

Steve is *so* sweet.

A real gentleman, really, although that might not have been Nancy's first impression of him, all these months ago.

He looks very good. Everyone says so, and Nancy obviously agrees.

Steve is the sort of guy that Nancy can see herself spend her entire life with.

Or, rather, he's the sort of guy that Nancy *used to* see her entire life with. Past tense. As in: She used to feel different about what she wants. She used to think someone like Steve is perfect for someone like her.

But things can change.

People can disappear.

Friendships can be born.

Lives can end.

"Hey, you okay?", Steve asks, smiling down at her. He seems slightly worried.

"What? Oh, sure, everything's fine." Nancy replies, smiling back. "Just lost in thought, I guess. I'm probably just tired."

"Yeah, I bet you are.", Steve agrees. "Who wouldn't be tired, after two hours of Millerson's science monologues? God, I'm so glad to be rid of that this year." He smirks, nudging her in the side. "Hey, did you ever fall asleep in his class, too? You can tell me, I probably won't even inform him!"

Nancy rolls her eyes, grinning. "Not everyone finds this stuff so terribly boring, you know?"

"Uh-huh, sure.", Steve nods. "That's what *you're* saying. But try telling that to the voice in your head."

He's faking a really deep, scratchy voice. "*Nancy... You know that science is boring!*", the voice murmurs, darkly. "*You should probably skip last class and make out with Steve in his car instead!*"

Nancy laughs. "You sound like Adam West.", she states, grinning at Steve.

He seems confused. "Who?"

"Batman?"

Steve eyes her awkwardly at this, a smile forming on his mouth. "Have you been spending too much time around your brother, or something?"

Nancy fumbles with the hair tie around her wrist. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, that voice totally sounds like that cat in the muesli bar ad!", he exclaims, laughing. "Come on, Nancy, that one was obvious."

She grins, rolling her eyes and scoffing.

But she also thinks about that movie night at Jonathan's last week, when

they both had to babysit and had decided to spend the afternoon and evening at the Byers' place together, with their brothers. Nancy hadn't mentioned to Jonathan that she technically wasn't being *forced* to babysit – Mike was 14, now, after all, and for him to spend an evening at home alone wasn't really a concern for their parents, at this point. Nancy's mom wasn't nearly as worried about stuff like this as Mrs. Byers could get, for obvious reasons.

But it had been fun, studying and watching old Batman-reruns with Jonathan.

Will and Mike were building some sort of film-themed weapons out of water pistols in his room – an addition to this year's weird Halloween costumes – but Jonathan and Nancy had talked about his favourite bands and her favourite perfume flavour, and somewhere along the line Nancy had felt happy to an almost scary level. She doesn't hang out with Jonathan often, although she always tries to make him feel like he has a friend in her, and when it really comes down to it, Jonathan is kind of perfect to talk to.

Jonathan Byers is the sort of guy around whom it is tricky to feel anything but comfortable. He is funny, smart, modest and interesting. He knows what to say when Nancy's thoughts are running in a bad direction (which they are overly often, now that the nights are getting longer and darker, and now that the memories return.)

Sometimes, she wishes Jonathan had a girlfriend. Just so she can finally stop feeling like she feels about him, in her most confusing moments. If Jonathan was in a relationship too, there'd be one more barrier between Nancy and her doubts about Steve. If Jonathan met someone, maybe Nancy could stop reflecting on the decisions she's made all these months ago. But Jonathan doesn't have a girlfriend, and Nancy's doubts remain firmly in her head.

The bell rings.

"Last chance, Nance.", Steve smiles, standing up with his tray in hand. "Geography? Or some extra time with your handsome boyfriend in an incredibly good-looking BMW 733i?"

Nancy glances at him, kindly.

"I think I have to choose Geography, just this once."

Steve shakes his head at her, exaggeratedly. "That's a shame, really. You could have learned a thing or two!"

She glares at him, amused, and Steve's mockery drops away for a second as he leans down and pecks her on the lips.

"Bye then. Love you."

And it's moments like this that freak Nancy out.

Not in the way that sleepless nights freak Nancy out, when Barb is suddenly back and clouding her dreams. And also not in the way Nancy feels freaked out when the occasional thoughts about Jonathan are consuming her head just a tiny, tiny bit too much, in order for them to be considered entirely *friendly*.

No, the way Nancy sometimes freaks out when she hears Steve say that he *loves her* is agonizing in different ways.

And it's also different than what Nancy feels when she notices Mike's problems, the way her little brother is facing his own demons and therefore freaking her out a bit, too.

(Sometimes when Nancy walks past his bedroom door at night, it sounds like Mike is crying in there, for example.

And perhaps she's imagining it, it's very quiet, after all. Or perhaps Mike really *is* crying. Maybe he's solely trying to dim the sound of his sadness down, hiding from the world under several thick blankets, like Nancy herself does, sometimes. A part of Nancy's terribly worried, because Mike used to be clever and kind and also enough of a jerk sometimes to be a believable example of a little brother, but not all that much more- and now Mike is disappearing into a zone of pure annoyance, more often than not. Maybe it's puberty. Maybe it's the sense of blemish and destruction and loss she also feels inside, when the nightmares and the guilt sweep over her.)

But when Steve says "I love you" to Nancy, that's a whole category of "Freaked out", on its own.

She often fears that she went too far. That she's going to hurt Steve, and that she won't be able to stop herself from it in time. Nancy fears that she made Steve (and herself) think that she was far more certain about everything, than she really is. Certain about them, about what they have, about what they build together over the past year.

There's this fear of disappointing one of the greatest people in her life, and it crunches her tummy like a steamroller once or twice per month – per week – per day...

November is quickly approaching. She wants to run away and forget everything she ever saw and did and said, sometimes.

Is this what Nancy's mom felt like, somewhere along the road? Is this what her Dad seemed like? Just about charming and interesting enough to give in to convenience and hope?

Steve isn't like that, though. Steve's got so much potential and...

It's insane to want to give Steve up.

It is.

"I love you, too.", She murmurs back, meeting his contented eyes before her boyfriend leaves the crowded cafeteria, along with dozens of other students.

Is this what it feels like to be normal?

Or is this what it really is supposed to feel like?

She doesn't know.

You're really cute,

I must admit.

But I need something deeper than this.

I wanna know when I'm looking at you

That you don't only see the things you want to.

Mr. and Mrs. Harrington are sort of obsessed with Nancy. That's what it has been like right from the start.

"Some more spagetthi, sweetie?" Steve's mom wants to know, spoon in hand. "Or some more cucumber salad?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks.", Nancy politely reassures her boyfriend's mom for what must be the fourth or fifth time. She gives her a smile. "It's delicious, though!"

"Look at how straight she's sitting, Steve!", his mother comments, sitting back down. "Now that's something they should consider teaching young people in PE. Some teenagers have the worst posture, if you ask me."

"You're right of course.", Mr. Harrington agrees, understatedly wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, "It's really not looking good, most teenagers' posture."

"Did you ever consider becoming a teacher, Nancy? Or maybe a motivational speaker!", Mrs. Harrington beams. "Oh, to be young once more and have so many options, it must be great. And with your good posture and excellent marks, you might give someone a great role model!"

Steve laughs. "God, mom, stop it! You're embarrassing her!"

"I'm not!", his mother insists, smiling confusedly. "I'm just paying Nancy compliments, isn't that right, Nancy?"

"Sure, absolutely!", she willingly agrees, causing Steve to snort and meet her eye.

"Well, you two clearly still have a lot of time to figure all of that out.", Mr. Harrington concludes, wisely, while his wife makes her way over to the kitchen, starting to replace the used dinner plates with clean bowls for the dessert. "If Nancy is going to work or not, and what she could potentially do when the time comes, is up to Steve and her alone.", he says to Mrs. Harrington, looking happy with

this outcome.

"What do you mean by *that*, Dad?", Steve frowns, scratching his neck. Nancy is starting to feel a little weird about where this is going, as well.

"All I'm saying is that many young women these days still see a... a certain appeal... in a more classical family model, don't they? Your mom is a stay-at-home mom too, isn't that right, Nancy?"

"Yes.", Nancy answers, sipping at her water. She's pretty unsure about how they even got into this conversation. She wishes they hadn't.

"Enough of all the grown-up-talk!", Rita Harrington laughs, putting a big bowl filled with strawberries and cherries on the table, close to where the vanilla ice cream is already waiting. "It's a little early for all of this, isn't it, Harald?"

Mr. Harrington just shrugs, loading huge amounts of the dessert in his bowl. "Well, next summer, Steve will be done with school, dear. It's about time to at least talk about things like this, I'd say."

"Dad!", Steve hisses, looking very annoyed and openly glaring at his father. Nancy feels a wave of sympathy for Steve rush over her, knowing that he hates the idea of his parents making her feel uncomfortable.

"Alright, alright, I'll stop!", Mr. Harrington capitulates, raising his hands in defeat.

To his son's girlfriend, he says. "Well, sorry Nancy. You know that I'm just trying to help!"

She forces a warm smile.

"Of course you are, it's okay."

She takes another sip from her water.

I don't want it if it's fake.

I don't want it if it's just for show.

Steve spins her around and through the air, in one of their school corridors on Tuesday.

Nancy's laughing, feeling excited to see him for the first time today. *This is probably what puppies feel like*, she thinks.

"Steve, stop it!", she snorts. She's not even trying to keep the volume down.

Nancy knows that they're not alone right about now, she knows that their classmates and even their teachers might be watching, but somehow it doesn't bother her at all. She kisses Steve back when he's reaching for her lips, enjoying the closeness, and... in a weird way... also the stares.

It's not like she has some voyeuristic thing going on, or something. It's just a good feeling when people can look at you and suppose that you have your life together. Isn't it?

Nancy has always been a little hyper-aware of other people's gaze. When she first spend the night at Steve's place – *that* night – going to school the next day was one of the scariest things Nancy ever had to do in her entire life (with the list of scary moments also including each of the other terrible moments she's encountered in that very week.)

Feeling people's eyes on her like that, *knowing* that *they* might know what she had done and knowing that they might know that she doesn't know how to feel about it yet,- it had sucked... Never before had Nancy Wheeler have to feel scared of *words* like... Well, words like the one on the cinema. *Slut*. Never before was a worry of that sort even remotely an issue for Nancy.

But Steve Harrington was the sort of guy who people talked about a lot, and who had seemed like the sort of guy who talked about quite a few things in return.

Nancy doesn't still feel that way. Steve doesn't really spend all that

much time anymore with some of his old friends, these days. He *kind of grew out of those friendships*, he'd said.

A few days after *that day*, when Barb's disappearance became common knowledge and a real concern for at least *some* of their classmates, Nancy had noticed the stares *again*.

They'd all looked at her with these pitying, curious faces, and it had made everything so much harder to bear.

Nancy had never been unpopular, but neither had she been in any real form of social spotlight. She wasn't a cheerleader, wasn't an editor for the school magazine, wasn't wearing the fanciest clothes or the most fashionable haircuts, but people generally found her pleasant enough. They knew enough about Nancy to be aware of her close friendship to Barb.

And what an irony that was!

What an irony, to be on the receiving end of all this pity and the forced-smiled assurances, when Nancy's inability to stay her best friend's best friend for just a couple days longer had ultimately killed Barb.

What an irony, that Nancy had put some silly teenage adventures over the person dearest to her, without ever being called out for it by anyone. She's never going to get punished. She's never going to forget.

The danger that has lurked in Hawkins is long gone. It has only been here for a couple of days, last November. Now things are stuck in a limbo of grief and fear and perfect fucking normalcy. Nancy doesn't crave the feeling of being rebellious anymore. She only craves her old self, with her best friend by her side. But that's gone.

If she'd been her old self, that night, Barb would still be here.

So why hasn't Nancy been her old self?

The answer to that question is as obvious as blinking Christmas lights in a dark, monster-trap-house.

Steve Harrington.

And that's perhaps why Nancy enjoys the stares, as she lets him spin her around and drown out her doubts about *him* and *them* a little more. She's not in a hurry to face the tiny, scary doubts. Because as much as a part of her loves him, she loved Barb more.

So that kissing him in public feels better than any other form of kissing him. It keeps the butterflies in her stomach. But it also keeps the pity out of their eyes.

And it's not like she doesn't adore Steve. It's just that Nancy struggles to keep doing so, sometimes. And maybe, at one point, she'll stop.

For now, she kisses him back, and that's that.

I want authentic, not just for fun.

If this love is plastic, it will break on us.

'Cause I don't want it if it's fake,

I don't want it if it's just for show.

I just want it if it's real-

And I'm thinking I should let you know.

(the end)

3. "You and I" (by Ingrid Michaelson)

"You and I"

by Ingrid Michaelson

Mike & Eleven

September, 1985

"One more step!...Careful... We're almost there...", he breathes into her curls, his large palms firmly covering her eyes as they slowly keep walking. El giggles, trying to ignore the lovely tingles she feels when his voice makes a raspy sound like that, so close to her. "How far, Mike?"

(How far, Papa?

Further than ever before, Eleven.)

She shudders at the weird memory, but quickly recovers when Mike speaks again. "Just fifteen more feet or so, El. Promise."

Trees are rustling in the wind, branches twitch under their shoes.

Mike is gently nudging her shoulder with his elbow, stopping her in her tracks. "Okay. Okay, we're there!"

He sounds excited, and then his fingers are gone from her face. El's lashes are slowly blinking upwards. And she sighs, turning around to him with a beam.

"Mike."

He's looming slightly over her, expectant look in his eyes. His skin and hair are reflecting the light from the orange sky, sunset quietly burning down the horizon through all the tree branches around them. Mirkwood used to be a scary place, once upon a time, but whenever El is here with Mike, it becomes sort of pretty, too. And now, it's

downright beautiful.

"Mike, this is perfect." she states, looking back at the carefully arranged picnic spot on the floor. There's a huge, purple blanket with a food-filled basket on top, - Eggos, smarties, cookies,...- are sticking out of the opening. Well, and probably some "real food", too, as Hopper and Joyce and even Nancy call it, but Mike must know El well enough by now to realise what the most prominent part of any picnic would be in El's eyes. And there's a huge jar with flowers inside, too: Yellow, green, light blue. She doesn't know the names of the flowers. She decides to look them up in one of her dictionaries, when she comes home. They're so very pretty, the flowers, and they look like Mike plucked them himself.

She turns back around to meet his eyes. Mike seems delighted. "So, you like it?"

She nods. "A lot.", she assures him, watching his teeth blink when he grins at the ground. He looks so relieved, somehow. Did he think she could possibly find this bad?

El loosely wraps her arms around his neck, right when Mike is reaching for her hand to pull her down to the floor with him. She somehow ends up falling halfway next to him and halfway in his lap, which makes Mike blush furiously. She's quickly letting go of him, smiling apologetically. She really hopes that didn't hurt his left knee, or something...

"We have exactly two hours.", Mike comments, with a quick glance at his watch and a returning smile. "And then we should be back at the cabin." Mike pulls something out of the basket, from under the eggos and the candy. The object in his hand turns out to be his pair of huge binoculars, the ones El has last seen lying around in his basement, just yesterday. "If we're lucky, it might get dark quick enough for us to see stars still, you know?"

El nods, smiling. "Like last time?"

"Yes! Then we can look for constellations again." He frowns, moving a little closer. "Hey, you're not cold, are you?"

El shakes her head. It's late September, yes, but the afternoon has been fairly warm and the sweater Mike borrowed her half an hour ago is green and fluffy and smells like him. She couldn't feel any more comfortable.

"Well, in case it *does* get too cold later, I brought blankets!", Mike smiles, reaching under the picnic basket and looking proud of his thoughtfulness. He should be. This entire plan is amazing.

"And I've also got..-", he pulls out an envelope from his jacket pocket, a blue one with two big letters on it, "I've got this for you."

Eleven eyes him, - from his tousled, black hair to where his teeth are currently grazing his bottom lip, and everything about Mike Wheeler is astounding to her, right then. He's always caring so much. Does he ever stop? It's like his heart is twice as big as it needs to be, or something. So much extra space for all the lovely ideas he gets, and for the warm looks and the tiny, sweet gestures.

And she doesn't even know why he'd prepare all of this for her, today.

"Mike? Is today... a special day?", she asks him, frowning uncertainly. She knows that it's no one's birthday, and she also is certain that Christmas and New Year's Eve are still very far away, too. So what's going on? Did she forget about something important?

"What? Oh, no! Don't worry about it, El.", Mike quickly assures her, seeing her concerned expression, "It's just... Well, it's probably easier to explain once you open it."

Mike points at the envelope she's still holding, his face flushed, and now El really wants to know what it is he's gotten her. She gently tears the paper open, and two shiny, almost plastic-y cards are falling out.

Eleven blinks at them, her eyes building words out of the letters, and when her brain makes a tiny jump a second later, her heart joins in and she gasps.

"Mike.", she whispers, looking up at him. He's gauging her reaction

really attentively, almost drinking it in.

"For that musical in Chicago, you know?", he explains, unnecessarily, since that's already said on the cards, "It's 'The wizard of Oz', because you liked the book so much and, um,..-"

He's fumbling with the tiny button on his sleeve, "I mean, you liked the 'Anne of Green Gables' thing Hopper and you saw in June so much, and I thought, maybe this time you and I could go and watch something you also really like together, and Nancy said she'd drive us, and if Hopper agrees...-"

El interrupts his rambling by leaning in and pulling him into a soft hug, and honestly, he melts into it like a marshmallow. He sighs and she feels her fingernails wander about his shoulder blades, almost subconsciously. Mike smells like Mike and he feels warm, and maybe El *has been* a little cold before, after all.

"So you like it?"

"The cards?", she asks.

He chuckles. "Er, yeah, the cards. Do you... uhm, do you want to go there with me?"

Mike tenses a little, apparently reconsidering. "I mean, or someone else. That would be okay, too, I mean, they're yours, and...-"

"Why would I not go with you?", she mumbles, honestly confused by the weird twists his mind sometimes makes. Almost like there's a labyrinth inside Mike's head, and if he's not careful he gets lost every now and then. *Like, really lost.*

El remembers how Lucas and Dustin had explained that word to her: labyrinth. It sounded so weird, but in a good way. They'd promised El to show her a real one, someday. A corn maze, or something, like the one that had come up in their last D&D adventure.

"I don't know." Mike says, reminding El on their current situation, and on the still-present tingling in her belly. "Maybe because last time you went with your Dad, and maybe you'd rather take him there with you again, or Max, or Will, or..-"

She's shaking her head against his shoulder, still hugging him quite tightly. And when she's collected all her bravery, El even moves in the tiny bit it takes to drop a kiss to Mike's bare neck. She hasn't done that very often before, but whenever she does, it makes Mike shiver so obviously that she giggles, and his thumbs press almost a little too deep into the fabric on her back for just a moment, and yet it feels... Somehow still too far away. She might have to think about that some more later.

"Mike, aren't musicals... expensive?"

He pulls back from her a little, meeting her eyes and trying to look casual while simultaneously blushing furiously.

"Yeah, well... They kind of are but... don't worry about it. It's in the week after Halloween, and I wanted to do something special either way. Really special, not like that time we build the paper maché vulcan on your '*Birthday*'" Mike is making quotation marks with his fingers, talking about the day written on *Jane's* birth certificate.

"Or like that time when we made chocolate chip muffins for *Dustin's* birthday, and Holly found them and hid them inside of her play kitchen." He snickers, making El break out in a wave of giggles, too. "It all melted!", she remembers, thinking of the sticky, disgusting inside of Holly's little plastic fridge, which, unlike a real fridge, didn't do a great job at keeping things cool in summer.

"Yeah, exactly!", Mike laughs, before calming back down again. "I mean, I just wanted to do something a little bigger for you just this once. It's almost been a year that you're... back... after all. And I... I'm not sure if you entirely know how much that means to me."

He blushes furiously, having mumbled the last part. As an afterthought, he adds: "Oh, and my mom loved the musical-idea, too, and gave me half of the money for the tickets, anyway, so... Just, don't worry about all that, El."

He rubs his neck, and El reaches behind him and pulls said hand away from there, casually entwining her fingers with Mike's instead.

"But... *All* we're doing is fun, Mike.", she tells him, earnestly. Eleven

isn't sure why he feels like he owes her anything, when it's so, so clearly the other way around.

Not, that she doesn't love the idea of going to a musical of "The wizard of Oz" with him. She definitely wants to do that, a lot. But not if Mike feels like he has to give her such nice, gigantic things.

And he's prepared the picnic today. *And* it wasn't even any sort of anniversary, *yet!*

He's way too wonderful for his own good.

He smiles, a full, dark-eyed kind of smile which only Mike Wheeler knows how to smile.

"You think so?", he asks, in a low, warm voice that reminds El of his hugs.

She nods, decidedly. "You're the best planner, Mike."

He shakes his head, grinning with the addition of half an eye-rol. "So, you're definitely going to go to the musical with me, right? Because I planned it, and I'm the best planner?"

El presses her lips together, partly in consideration, partly to keep from smiling.

Then, she nods.

Mike exhales a relieved breath, but El knows that he's mostly joking, this time. He knows he has convinced her already.

"Thank you.", he says, and El wants to kiss him very much for such a weird sentence, right then.

So, she does.

They actually end up seeing quite a lot of stars, lying there on a blanket in Mirkwood. They also see an anthill close to them, but luckily enough not close enough to attack all the tiny Eggo crumbs on their blanket. Mike tells her about the many tunnels such an

anthill has, and how they're all working together, and communicating. El thinks that's she's heard that before, in some documentary on TV, but when Mike says it it's a lot more interesting.

And then they talk about stars, and it's once again like Mike knows absolutely everything, and her second month in school really can't approach fast enough. El wants to be like Mike, wants to know a lot of things, not just because she wants to fit in but also because it's so interesting, it all is. Who would have thought that there's so much stuff to learn? Even when she was still hiding in the cabin and studying all day long, just a little while back, El hadn't been aware of all the things she wanted to find out about the world.

"So the stars change every night?", she asks him, snuggling closer. They will soon have to go, it is all gloomy around them already, but she somehow doesn't even feel one bit scared in the dark forest.

Mike nods. "Yes, the stars keep moving. I mean, they look like that to us. That's how sailors used to know where they were, they always looked at the stars and thought about what they meant, you know."

She blinks at him, meeting his eyes. They're black in the dark, like warm coal. "But if the earth is always turning, why don't we feel it?"

"Because it's really huge.", Mike explains, his thumb rubbing tiny patterns on the back of her wrist. "The earth is so big that we don't even feel how it moves."

"But we have days and nights, and that's how we know.", El states, hoping she got that right. It's daytime when the earth is facing the sun, and it's nighttime when the earth turned away from sun. Right?

He smiles brightly, sitting up. "Yes, that's how we know." He's pulling her up with him, dropping a gentle kiss to her lips again. "And it's *night* right now, so Hopper is probably going to kill us if you're not back at the cabin in twenty minutes or so..."

El glances at his watch. Hopper said he'd work late, and he reluctantly gave Mike his permission for a picnic today, after all, so they might still be fine. She's helping Mike pack all the stuff back in their basket, before they're walking back to his bike together.

"Thank you again.", she mutters, when they hug goodbye, a little later. "For everything."

Mike's face is very red, and very much grinning. "No, I mean, sure! I'm just glad you liked it."

El pecks him on the lips one more time, short and sweet. And maybe it kind of *does* make sense that people can't feel the world turning, under their feet, Eleven considers. If Mike doesn't know how much he means to her, then maybe the biggest things are sometimes the most invisible ones.

Or maybe she just has to kiss him a little more often, until he notices that.

(The end)

4. Good life (by Francis Dunnery)

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone, this is my interpretation of what Jim Hopper's past could look like, particularly his past involving Joyce Byers. Please feel free to tell me if you think something's off with my timeline (here, they're both born around 1944), and as always thanks for reading. :)

Good life

by Francis Dunnery

(Joyce & Hopper)

1961

He's mowing the lawn when she calls him the next time, and he almost wouldn't have heard the phone ring from the kitchen window.

But he sucks at mowing the lawn, mostly because the grass is annoyingly long and keeps getting stuck in the wheels of the stupid old mower, or something... So he has to stop every couple steps. And anyway, it's not like he's in a hurry here.

Mornings shouldn't really be about some lame chore, as it is, and he shouldn't be the one doing it. But Jim can use the cash his dad occasionally gives him for this stuff, so...

„Hey, how's it going?“, she breathes into the earpiece, some miles east from where he's currently leaning against his kitchen wall, and Jim feels good about this. Really good.

„Not much up, over here.“ Jim hums back, scratching his neck. „What about you?“

Joyce smiles when she answers, he can tell. „Not much going on here

either... Do you want to come over later?"

He snorts. „What, not into partying anymore, or what?"

„I don't know, I just... Have you heard what Alex did to Jennifer P.?"

Jim rolls his eyes. She should know him better than that by now, he thinks with a grin. Gossip is beneath him. Beneath both of them, actually.

„What, did he forget her birthday, or something?"

„Probably, but that's not what I meant. No, he cheated on Jennifer... With her sister Natalie!", Joyce tells him, sounding scandalized.

Hm. He didn't see that one coming. Sure, Alex is as stupid as they come, but apart from that...

„Seriously?"

„M-hm.", Joyce confirms, taking a deep breath,- or, more likely, a long drag from a cigarette. Yep, Jim thinks, he needs to keep mowing the lawn in a couple minutes. His own last pack is almost empty, and he's in desperate need for some cash.

„So, that means..?", he goes on, unsure why that Alex thing matters right now...

„I just think today could be lame. Sounds like no one will go to Alex' party after all. Jennifer's friends won't go, and that's basically the entire cheerleading team. And without them there, it will probably be a sausage-fest."

At that, Jim barks out a loud laugh that infects her right away. „A what?!"

„You know what I mean."

„Oh, so you worry about me not having enough people to flirt with during this party? That's very generous of you.", he jokes.

She snorts. „Nah, I just don't want to end up watching some sort of

wide-whizz-competition between you and the jerks from the swim team all evening long."

„You think *that's* what happens if there's not enough girls at parties?", he laughs.

„I think that's what happens if there's not enough Jennifers and Aubreys at parties. Those two always come up with the games and stuff. *And* they bring the snacks.", Joyce argues, a smirk in her voice.

„Fair enough, so that's a no to Alex' party. Where should we go instead?"

She's thinking about that for a moment.

„Do you still have that red canopy swing in your backyard?", she asks.

„Yes...?"

„Then let's just meet there, okay?"

Shit.

„My Dad's home, Joyce."

It's quiet for a moment, and he feels embarrassed. But what are you gonna do?

„How about that tiny skate park behind Macy's? It's never too crowded there. I can bring beer.", she suggests, helpful as always.

„Uh, sure. Around seven?"

„Let's say eight."

„Alright, Joyce. See you later."

„Later, Jim."

They hang up and he makes his way out into the garden again.

It's hotter than before, the new angle of the sun keeping their oak

tree from offering shade any longer. But it's alright, Jim never really minded physical work. It's a good distraction, and soon the air will cool off.

„So, do you think it's getting better? Or..-?"

„Worse. Definitely worse.", he answers, gulping down the last bit of his second beer. He should probably stop after the third one, Jim decides.

„That sucks.", Joyce offers, biting down on a slightly cracked fingernail.

„Yeah."

His dad's been a little unbalanced lately, as Joyce likes to put it. Drinking more than usual, more often than usual. Loudly cursing about Jim's mom in the process. Trying to bicker with his son, shout and complain and argue. And last time Jim brought Joyce over, - sitting in his backyard with her, talking and watching as she kicked the swing with her feet everytime it came close to the bench they sat on,- last time Jim had Joyce over, his old man came out and told her to „stop dressing like a hussy", pointing at her skirt and bare arms. And Jim could have died out of sheer embarrassment.

Joyce might have laughed it off, telling him that her own dad made the same silly remarks sometimes and that it didn't matter, but god, when had Jim's old man become such a rambling old drinker? He'd never really felt... ashamed of his dad, till recently.

John Hopper had changed a lot, since the divorce. Break-ups can have a pull on people, you know? (Especially on people like his dad, still somewhat stuck in terrible memories of Vietnam, who never completely recovered.) Jim's mom has had her reasons to leave, but yeah, this break-up could have killed his dad. It still might. People leave people, and then there's too much of this or too much of that, and things turn downhill faster than you can say lawn mower.

But that's not *his* life. *His life* will be different.

Jim's glad that Joyce is here to hang out with him tonight, and that they didn't end up going to yet another stupid party. It's nice, the wind is soft and warm and the beer she brought is almost cold, and she feels right and this feels right.

It also feels right later on, when his left knee falls asleep from having her lean halfway onto it, and when there's at least two or three new mosquito bites close to his elbow (that he won't notice until tomorrow).

They're making out, then. They do that sometimes.

It's nice.

And no, it's not some gigantic deal or great big love story bullshit, alright? It's just him and her, on sandy floor with their backs leaning against a tree trunk and lips tasting like the cigarette they shared earlier. And it smells like almost cold beer, and it's nice.

They don't really know where this is going, but whatever.

Joyce wants to stay in Hawkins. He doesn't.

He wants... some other place, maybe Chicago. Maybe become a cop, or a firefighter, or something. And to be part of something important. There's not a lot of important things in Hawkins.

But, yeah, okay, Joyce is one of those things.

She wraps her hands tighter around his neck, fingernails scratching lightly, and Jim hums quietly. How is it going to end with her and him? Loud and difficult? Quiet and calm? He's hoping for the latter, but he's also not really thinking about all of that shit yet.

So he's gonna keep kissing Joyce a little longer. Not worrying, not stressing. Just kissing an old childhood friend of his, and then fishing one or two more cigarettes out of her jeans pocket with a smug grin that she'll answer with an eye roll.

But he'll share the smoke with her, and she'll smile.

*Softly Now,
You owe it to the world
And everyone knows that you're my favourite girl*

*But there's some things in life that are not meant to be
I'm not meant for you and you're not meant for me*

*Here's to our problems
And here's to our fights
Here's to our achings*

*And here's to you having a Good life
From Me*

1965

He's studying old police files when she calls him. He knew this was coming.

„Hey, uhm, it's Joyce?"

He supresses a sigh and forces a half-smile onto his face. Maybe she'll hear it in his voice, like she always used to...

„Hi Joyce, this is Jim."

„Oh, good! Your colleague gave me this number, I hope I'm not bothering you, er,.."

„No, Joyce, you're not bothering me.", he says, closing the file in front of him and clicking around with a pen instead. The smile on his face is almost genuine now.

„I got your invitation back, yesterday... Jim, are you sure you can't come to the wedding?"

„Sorry, Joyce, no. I'm drowning in work at the moment, so...-"

„Yes, but... I mean, it's only one day.", she chuckles, awkwardly.
„Don't you think your department can keep the bad guys in check

without you for that long?"

He's offering her a half-hearted chuckle, before becoming reluctant again. „It's just a lot of work here, Joyce. And I'd probably feel a little out of place, anyway, to be honest."

He admits that last part almost accidentally, and immediately regrets it. But maybe it's for the better, going for honesty.

Joyce sighs and sounds hurt, but she's probably not all that surprised, either.

„Okay. Yeah, okay, I get that. I just thought it would be nice to catch up, you know? And for you to properly meet Lonnie. I think you'd like him."

Oh, Jim remembers Lonnie. And no, he wouldn't.

„I'm sure you'll have a great wedding, Joyce. Don't worry about me, okay? We'll see each other in October anyway, right? For that class reunion at Claire's?"

„Yes, of course!", she agrees, sounding relieved. „I just don't want to lose contact too soon, Jim.", she admits.

Something inside him stings badly, right then.

„Don't you worry about that, Joyce.", Jim repeats, because it's easier that way.

„Okay, Jim. I won't. You take care, alright?"

„You too, Joyce. Bye."

„Bye.", she says, and then she hangs up.

It will be a while until they talk again.

„So, how have you been?", she asks, quietly, softly. The gin in her plastic cup swirls the ice cubes around, creating clicking sounds against the glass. The canopy swing looks exactly the same as it used to. *They're* the ones who changed.

Jim shrugs. How has he been...

„Fine, I guess. Pretty good, actually. There's this promotion I'm hoping for. Could be interesting, but also a hell lot of work..."

„What's it about?", she asks, excitedly.

„Well, if things go as planned, I might be part of the homicide division soon. I'd be involved in murder investigations, perhaps even lead some, you see? I don't know, compared to what I'm doing at the moment, it sounds good."

„What does your girlfriend say to that?", Joyce wonders, furrowing her brows. „Doesn't Louise get nervous, thinking about all the scary stuff you'll see soon?"

He shakes his head, confused. „Who?"

„Louise?", Joyce repeats, puzzled. „Your girlfriend?"

Something clicks.

„Oh, *Louise*! No, no, we're not together anymore. That ended over a year ago." *Among other flings*, he silently adds, but he doesn't need to say that.

Joyce raises her eyebrows, surprised by this.

„I did meet someone new, though.", Jim mentions, wanting to be honest. His current relationship could actually lead somewhere, after all.

„Oh, really?", Joyce smiles, seeming happy for him. „Who's that?"

„Her name's Diane, she works at a flower shop.",

Joyce laughs. „What, did any bouquets get stolen, and she had to call

the cops? Is that how you two met?"

He snorts. „Yeah, something like that."

They still smile, but silence spreads again. He takes another sip of his drink, enjoying the way the liquid burns in his throat.

„I'm sorry, Hop.", she says, once again. „I'm so sorry about your dad."

He just nods, staring ahead at the treeline bordering the garden. The trees have grown a lot since his last visit.

„He was old.", is all he can say.

Then, other thoughts are consuming his mind again.

„I think I'll sell the house. Not immediately, but in a couple months, maybe... I don't think I'll move back to Hawkins anytime soon, and the property market is good right now."

He sees Joyce nod, out of the corner of his eye, and turns his head to see her face again. She still looks a lot like the girl he used to smoke cigarettes and share his teenage thoughts with, and yet he feels like decades past them by.

And there's this look in her eyes when she talks of home, talks of *him*. She's not happy, Joyce. Not happy at all.

Jim has become a good observer, at this point, and he *sees* stuff. There's probably a million problems painting the dark circles under Joyce' eyes, and a million fights that make her hands shake like that. And Lonnie is a jerk, always has been and always will be.

The thing is, that it's none of Jim's business.

All he can do is hope things will get better for her. And for himself, too.

Joyce leaves Jim with a hug and a home-made, slightly burned vegetable casserole, and her hair still smells like it used to all this time ago.

For a moment, that makes his heart stop. For a moment, he wishes things had gone differently. But they haven't, and now they're here.

*Softer Now,
You owe it to yourself
And don't think that you will be left on the shelf
Cause there's someone for you and there's someone for me
Like me you'll meet them eventually
Here's to your lover
And here's to my wife
Here's to your children and here's to you having a good life
From Me
A Good Life*

1978

The day Sara leaves them is a Saturday.

She used to love Saturdays. Everyone loves Saturdays.

But Sarah might just have loved them the most.

It's strange how things sometimes keep existing, after the world already ended.

It's strange how he feels some sort of relief, as he smashes the answering machine down the stairs. With all those loving condolences, from all those loving half-strangers. He doesn't need that shit. He doesn't need anything else but what he's lost. And what he's yet going to lose.

The day his marriage ends is a Saturday, too.

1980

Chief Hopper is good at his job. He's sometimes late and often lazy,

but he listens and he provides. That's not too bad for a shitty, boring job like this. His hometown has always been quite uneventful. It's exactly what he needs.

Unfortunately, it also leaves him with plenty of room to mess his personal life up. Or lack thereof.

He just has this restlessness in him. Never stopping, never quite gone.

He calls Diane every other night, and her husband hates it.

Her little boy hates it, too, waking up from the phone up until they started plugging it out in the evening.

But Jim feels the need to talk about her, about Sarah, and there's not a lot of people he can talk to about that. He's started taking pills and almost started drinking the way his dad used to, but the demons keep haunting and the scars keep burning.

The thought of what his little girl would think, seeing them so apart, makes him sick.

But there's no rewind buttons in life, no turning around, no way back. There's just his job. And women, and pills, and smoke. And that's that.

Loudly now.

You've lost all your pain.

You're married with children and happy again.

But now I'm regretting the moves that I made.

Painful mistakes I so easily made.

Enough of my problems, they only cause fights.

Forget that I rang you...

He talked to Joyce again, last week.

She still works at Donald's shop. Probably getting paid less than she did with that babysitter job back in high school. But it's good to know that he's not the only one in Hawkins whose job is ridiculously boring.

Joyce also still looks like she's struggling, with her two boys and all that. Lonnie does exactly nothing for them, that misfire.

It's good that she does what she does, though. Better poor and alone than with a guy like that. She's got herself and she's got her boys. And if people find her weird, then it's because she's stronger than what they're used to. Stronger than what *she's* used to.

She still looks like that cigarette-sharing rebel to him, anxiety and all.

1984

„Hop? Is everything alright?", Joyce asks, as he presses the earpiece tighter against his stubble. El looks over to him with a curious glance, and he presses a finger against his lips, making sure she stays quiet at all costs.

Not that El is overly chatty, but you never know.

„Um, sure. I just wanted to check in and ask how things are going...", he says, trying hard to sound nonchallant.

„How things are going?", Joyce wonders, sounding like she finds that strange and almost funny.

„Well, I'm cooking right now... The potato salad only looks a little bit like soup today, do you want to come over and join us for dinner? Bob is also coming over."

„That's nice, Joyce, but what I actually meant was just... How is Will doing, after this morning?"

„Oh.", she says, audibly turning uneasy as she sees what he means.

The last session with Owens was pretty bad.

The boy obviously isn't over the whole traumatic experience from last autumn yet.

„He's doing... okay, I guess.", she sighs, sounding like she's fidgeting with something. „Today his friends were here, and I really think it's helping him, you know. They are good kids, really good kids. But still, I wish there was something I could do, something I could..."

„Hey, hey.", he interrupts her, wanting to calm Joyce down. „You're doing tons, okay? Will can be lucky to have you."

She sniffs. „I hope you're right about that, Hop."

„It's true. And so can Bob the Brain be, by the way. Lucky to have you."

„Stop calling him that!", she laughs, and he joins in.

„Alright, alright."

„So, are you coming over for that really successful potato-salad?", she wants to know, sounding almost hopeful.

Jim looks over at El, who is still blinking at him curiously, and he shakes his head.

„Sorry, Joyce, but I already have a date with a hamburger and a baseball game. Maybe next time, okay?"

„Yes, of course, Jim! Don't worry about it. Thanks for calling, I appreciate that."

„Take care, Joyce."

„You too, Jim.", she smiles (he knows she smiles), and hangs up.

It's quiet in the cabin again.

„Who's ...Bob?", Eleven then shyly wants to know, brows slightly furrowed.

Hop drops down in his seat again, studying his can of beer. „Oh, you picked up on that, didn't you?", he sighs, smiling despite his overly long day.

El nods, looking serious.

„Bob is... a friend of Will's mom.", he shrugs. „And he's very clever. That's why I sometimes call him 'Bob the Brain', but she doesn't like that." He chuckles. „You know what a *brain* is, right kid?"

Eleven nods, pointing towards her head.

„Your friend... too?", she asks, probably still referring to Bob.

Hopper puts the can down next to him, considering that.

„No, he's probably not. I've known him for a long time, though."

El's features become questioning again.

„But I never really talked much to him. He seems nice enough, I guess."

„Nice enough?"

„Hmm.", Hop confirms. „Nice enough to make Will's mom happy. And that's what friends do, right?"

Eleven nods again, looking a lot more comprehending this time. She even smiles a little.

Yes, Jim thinks to himself. That's what friends do, and that's what he wants for Joyce. Her being happy.

Because, at the end of the day, that's what she always deserved.

(And if there's still a part of him that wants to be the reason for that happiness...

Well, now is not the time for such thoughts.)

Enough of my problems,

they only cause fights.

Forget that I rang you

*And promise you'll have such a
Beautifully happy*

*and painlessly romantic
Good life*

From Me
